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# Into the Park

*Submitted in partial consideration of a Master of Fine Arts Degree in Photography*

**Joel Lederer**

**Rochester Institute of Technology**

Rochester, NY 2004

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## Introduction

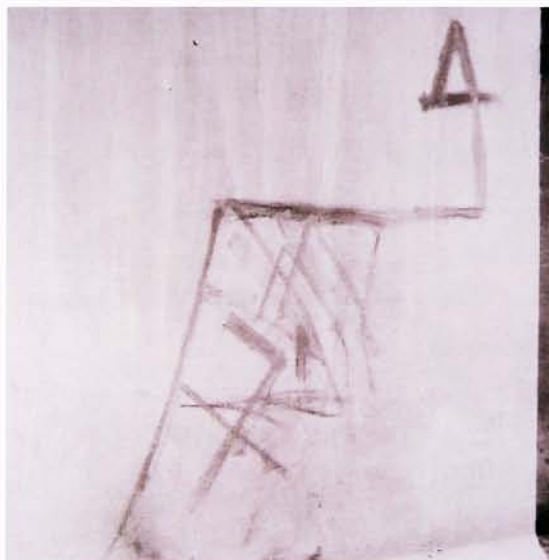
My thesis exhibition, “Down the Street and Into the Park,” was the culmination of several years I spent exploring the subject of landscape and making images—wandering and getting lost in ideas and in pictures. Although this work explores the subject of nature, making the images was perhaps the only “natural” thing about the work. Though there were the requisite leaves, rocks and dirt, I eventually realized that nothing I photographed was really “natural,” but simply props for my imagery.

The exhibition dealt with the organic landscape from the perspective of one who had never really left the city. The work presents visual ideas of what the landscape meant to me and, hopefully, to others. In this paper, I explain the process of making the work: the ideas and references that I cultivated while working, and my visual methods and metaphors. I hope that it gives some insight into not only what I was thinking about but also how the work progressed.

Growing up in an urban environment colored my view of the landscape. Cities, with their neighborhoods, beaches and lakes were to me objects with their own individuality and character. Out of the city were the farmer’s market, summer camp, Santa’s Village, national parks, and theme parks, which developed for me this notion of the place as an object. Only “nature” as the generic we call it, was a greener and less populated object than the city or the beach. Nature was a place to which you had to drive, a place where the monotony of trees and sky was overshadowed by mosquitoes and the lack of urban amenities.

My early education at a Zionist grammar school in Chicago, with its discussions about a promised land (Israel) that needed me for its redemption, transformed the idea of the land-as-object into the land-as-idea. In school, I would watch movies about Israel, where the people looked like me but acted and dressed differently. They were depicted wearing gym clothes, picking oranges from trees, carrying weapons and the cinematography represented them within this specific environment.

As good Zionist schoolchildren, we were taught about the importance of this land. Giving it assistance was a serious mission to be embraced with pride. Our activities included collecting money for tree planting, and I would proposition my parents’ friends for this worthy cause. Although I couldn’t quite grasp at that age its importance, I knew it was a mandatory and somehow beneficial cause. Now the idea of the land-as-object was expanded into that of an object that was designed and funded by good people. Like any large city, the land of Israel was an object in progress, as though a large-scale



construction effort was under way. Ironically, I discovered years later that this idea was mostly correct.

Due to these activities, nature had come to represent something that one “did” either for relaxation, as in vacation spots (Miami was also nature to me—heat and humidity, and a large expansive sky provided the atmosphere), shopping for better produce (the farmer’s market outside of Chicago had excellent blueberries), or to learn about the past (Amish Acres provided a historical setting for actors to dress up in period costumes and re-enact scenes from the past). As well, my ideas of nature had become synonymous with a refuge; and one that needed us for its defense.

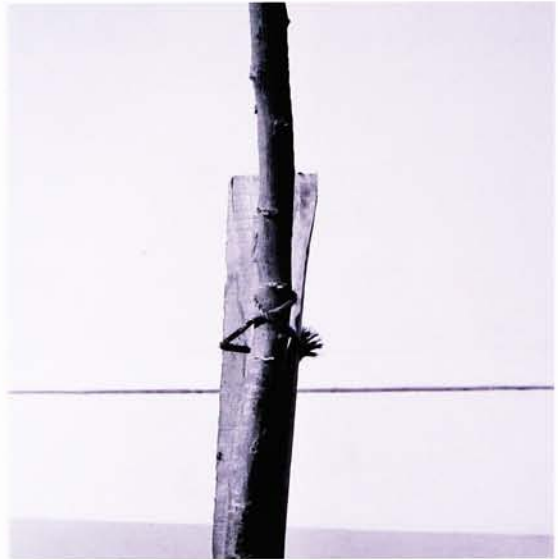
With these ideas fermenting throughout adolescence, I decided to move to Israel at the age of 22 (after receiving my undergraduate degree in New York City). I had, over those years, learned more about Israel and the language of its people. While I understood that it was similar to other places in the world, I still had the idea that Israel was the paradigm of “nature,” and that by moving there I would become more “natural”.

I had mostly felt that Israel would be a good place for me to develop my photography, away from the familiar cities of America and in a context that held different aesthetic possibilities and problems. As a result, most of the photographs I made during my seven years there center around the relationship of the natural to the man-made. This is because the urban areas there were built-up quickly and without much aesthetic consideration. The accidental look of the streets and buildings of Tel-Aviv seemed to mimic a forest or jungle whose design was pragmatic and unconcerned with its aesthetic appearance. Unlike New York City or Chicago I felt as though I was photographing untamed nature. I could make something out of this material, something other than a mere representation of the object that it was.

The “natural” areas of Israel on the other hand, with their trees that I had helped fund, seemed designed and manicured. They were essentially, and literally, parks. Thus, the natural seemed man-made, and the artificial seemed natural. It then became my task to explore and record the look of things from within this frame of reference. In hindsight, this starting point was inspired by my own journey for self-understanding. My “quest” had been always to find a sense of harmony between my environment and myself. What I had labeled “man-made” and “natural” essentially meant “me” and “the Universe.”

My technique was inspired by readings on Taoism and Zen Buddhism. I felt that the way to make photographs was to deconstruct the concepts and vision that I had been taught, and attempt to become unified within my surroundings. I felt that if I could reserve aesthetic judgment and remain observant I would, through photography, attain a





harmony with my environment and ultimately within my own mind. I was inspired in this quest by the words of the Tao Te Ching:

*Attain the climax of emptiness,  
Preserve the utmost quiet:  
As myriad things act in concert,  
I thereby observe the return.  
Things flourish,  
Then each returns to its root.  
Returning to the root is called stillness:  
Stillness is called return to Life,  
Return to life is called the constant;  
Knowing the constant is called enlightenment.<sup>1</sup>*





## Pre-Thesis Work

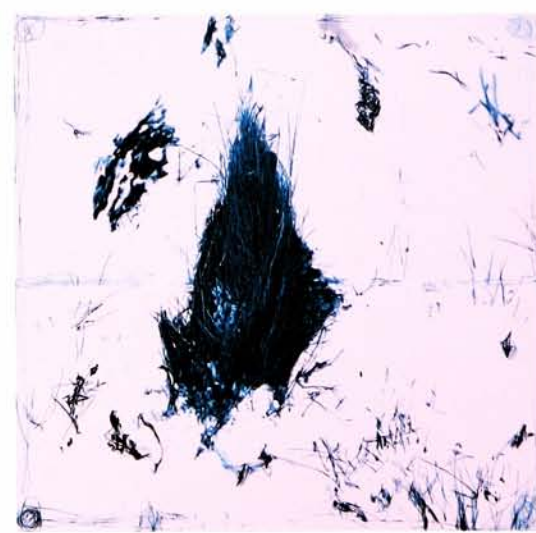
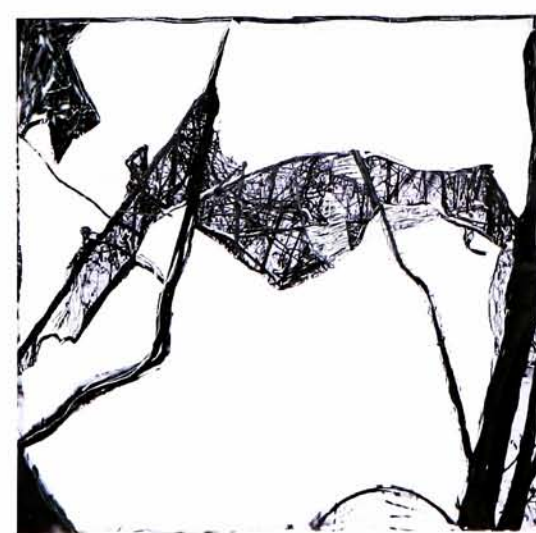
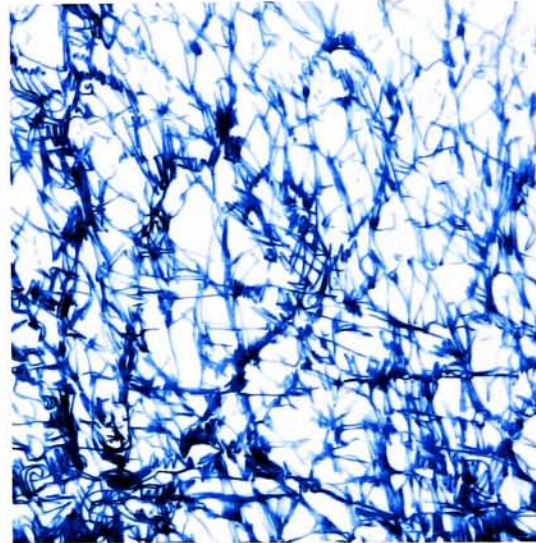
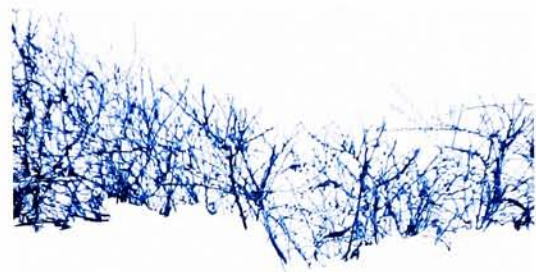
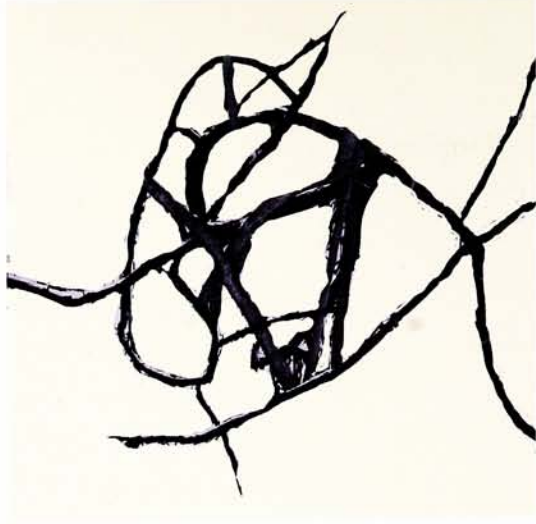
After arriving at the Rochester Institute of Technology for graduate studies in Photography I continued to explore a project I had begun in Israel: an exploration of the two most elemental organic subjects, skies and sea. The images from my first quarter's review were small black-and-white images of landscape elements, paired in couplets to give an expression of human interaction. The objects that I photographed were meant to represent larger opposing actions always at work: coming together and splitting apart, entering and exiting, covering and revealing. This seemed to me the natural progression of my work: the rhythm and essence of the landscape. I needed to continue with that ritual of making images, though my classmates and professors felt differently.

In that first critique, my final product appeared to reviewers to be too familiar, too straight-edged and nostalgic. Landscape, I was told, was a "dead" subject that held little interest for the contemporary art scene, whose concerns were different and more specific. The critique directed me to a place where I wasn't comfortable, where my abilities would be put to the test. Yes, the final results were too derivative, yet I couldn't agree that the subject of landscape was trivial. The appearance of the land and our interaction with it are subjects worthy of aesthetic contemplation as well as being of historical importance.

There was one picture from the first quarter's portfolio that led me to shift my approach to this subject. While photographing at the lake one day, I had become frustrated thinking about everything that was wrong with my subject matter and, for that matter, my photography overall. Out of this frustration I began throwing rocks into the water, and to my surprise I then began to see pictures in the concentric rings that were made on the surface of the still water, and made several images. In the following week's critique, my classmate Brian Emery commented that these images illustrated how for the first time I had interacted with my subject in a physical way. It was an epiphanic moment for me, which led me to realize that the next step in my photographic development was to incorporate the mark of my own hand into the imagery.

My second quarter work revolved heavily around this idea, and was a combination of the photographs I had been taking and the sketching I would do for myself. I had begun to use Adobe Photoshop to make images that mimicked the process of hand painting on photographs, a technique I had learned from Jill Enfield at Parsons School of Design. These digital images combined natural elements: branches, ice and shrubbery, with flat color fields whose purpose was to hide and disguise the natural and place them within the context of a graphic image. I was afforded the opportunity to manipulate the subject





transforming it from a photograph into abstracted “painting.” Objective form was flattened-out, and the subject was heavily manipulated.

As I was experimenting with the process of combining photography and drawing—some images appeared as photographs but were in essence drawn (as in the blue-print branches), and some appeared as drawings but were in fact photographs (as in the ice).

It appeared that I was attempting to use these images as hieroglyphs; the forms they took seemed to mimic crude drawings of animals or topography. Some looked as though paint had been scratched away to reveal something hidden and others looked as though the object was being obscured intentionally. The drawings were primitive and their strokes erratic; they mimicked the appearance of doodles or sketches. I began to realize the connection between sketching and draft writing; both were timeless means of recording. I had felt that something, as yet undefined, was starting to happen.

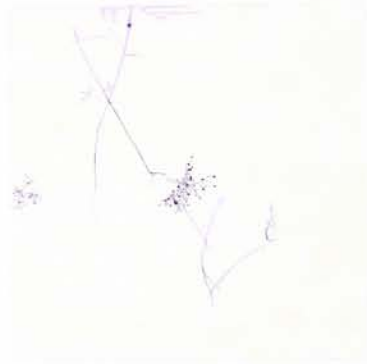
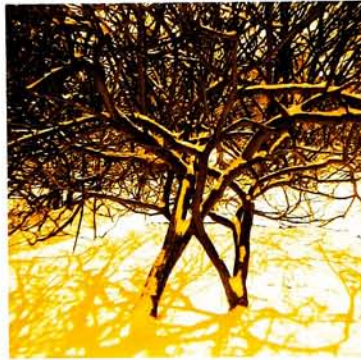
In the end I had found a method and technique, and perhaps made couple of good images, yet the message seemed unclear. At that time, my professor Elliott Rubenstein told me that my goal should be to find a reason for combining this method with my subject, thereby creating a means for their co-existence.

Ostensibly, my new process was an experiment that I afforded myself in an attempt to learn some of the new technology, and was urged by my professors to continue. Professor Osterman encouraged me to find a ritual in this process that hopefully would lead me to an enlightened view, and subsequently to more evolved work. It was his simple and timeless advice that provided me the comfort and confidence to continue in these uncharted waters. Professor Weiss had asked me if what I was making were photographs. I told him that I really didn’t know, and his reply was that it might be a good idea to find out. Though I had no idea as to what he meant, it somehow stuck with me.

I was unsure where to go next. I had a method, but was uncertain as to how that should manifest itself in the imagery. I knew that I wanted to continue with the landscape as a subject, and so began to create more heavily manufactured scenery with more obvious manipulations. I continued with the “cut out” style as well as the “drawing on technique” while also beginning to re-form objects themselves.

As I continued to evolve this process, I came to understand that what I had been making were allegorical representations of *how* we view the landscape. Symbolically, it represented our culturally manufactured method of how we look at the land. The images were an exploration of the man-altered environment. Perhaps making these images from my point of view would reveal a collective viewpoint of the culture in general. If the land

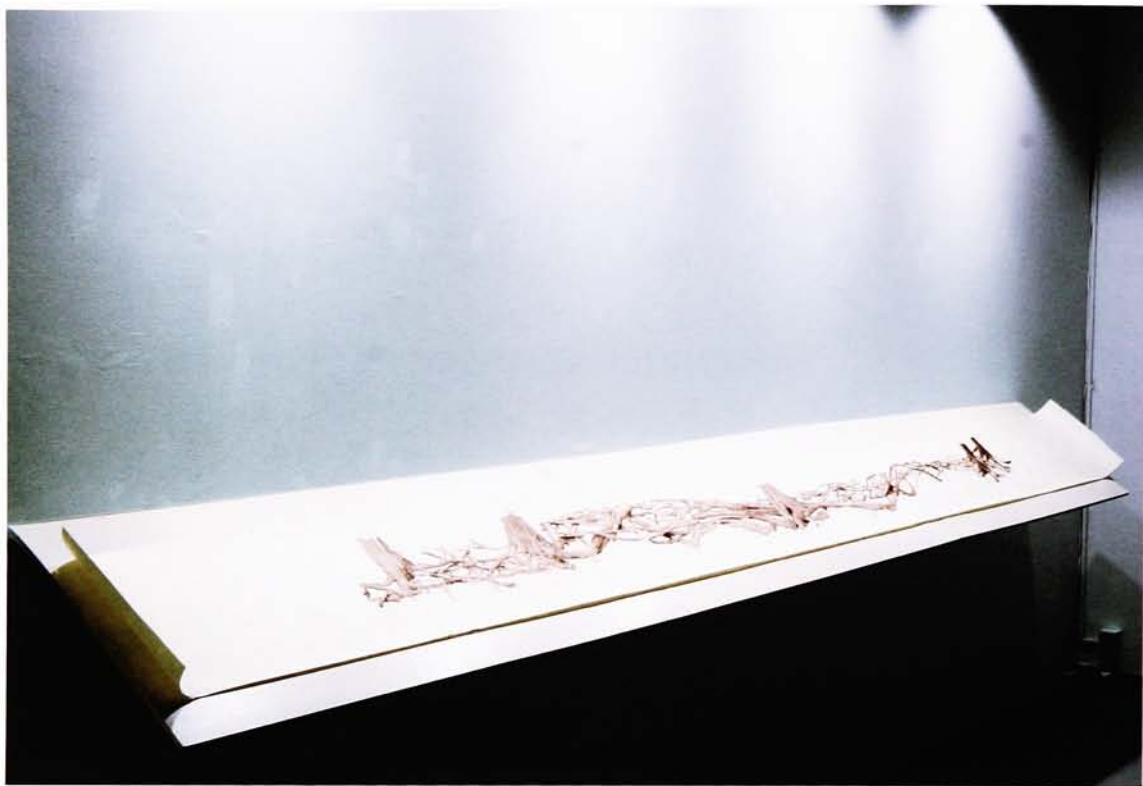




was built-up by human hands and machines, our means of regarding it was formed by equally human ideas and memories, television and other cultural media, stories and heritage. In other words, our vision is *colored* by the messages that surround us. Most of all, I wanted these ideas to be as accessible as the land.

It was important for me to show how the idea of landscapes—both urban and rural—had become depersonalized and homogenous. Our expectations of what we see became what we see; the images replaced the world itself. Pictures are sometimes better than reality; they could give us the feeling of experience without the burden of experiencing it directly. With these concepts beginning to take shape my thesis work could begin.





*"The Roots Scroll"*

*14 x 188 inches*

*Inkjet on parchment paper*

*2003*

## The Roots Scroll

*The Roots Scroll* is perhaps the most direct visual descendent of my first year's work at RIT. It contained the aforementioned subtractive (cut-out) process to digitally fuse photography and drawing while making a more overt statement about the subject matter and its precedents in art. Through the process of making this picture (long hours of careful "cutting" and "connecting" in Adobe Photoshop), my interests in Zen Buddhism and Taoism became evident. In hindsight, the process of making the image was a metaphor for the final image itself—there was something that I needed to unearth in order to advance myself to the next level. The process of digging away at the roots I began to pair the pictures content with its language; it showed the points I had wanted to express. This was quite a realization for me; not only in finding a new method of making pictures, but because armed with this new technique the correlation of subject and medium would combine to give the pictures their significance. It appears now that through Professor Osterman's advise concerning the ritual, I had addressed Professor Rubenstein's concerns about syntax conflicting with subject matter.

My prior education in photography had centered on questions of subject matter and its presentation. Abandoning this traditional approach directed me to see that digital representation allowed me to create my own conceptual landscapes. In the *Roots Scroll*, I placed the tree roots within a religious (torah scroll) context in order to present its subject as carrying spiritual weight.

To many cultures of antiquity, a tree's roots represented the roots of our contact with the Godhead. Trees have special significance in many cultures from the near east, probably due to their relative scarcity. Tree worship had become common practice in which the tree was considered the abode of the deity. Offerings were laid at the tree's base and on its branches.<sup>2</sup> In Ancient Egypt, several types of trees appear in mythology and art (although the hieroglyph signifying the tree appears to specifically represent the sycamore). According to the Book of the Dead, twin sycamores stood at the eastern gate of heaven from which the sun god Ra emerged each morning. The Greek Gods were traditionally born at the foot of a tree, and Siddhartha had gained perfect wisdom while sitting under the bodhi tree.

Yet, closest to my own cultural history are the trees of the Jewish tradition. The Kabbalistic notion bases the creation of the world upon the ten sefirot (aspects of the creator). These sefirot are written concepts such as love, judgement, wisdom, will, etc. They serve as the backbone (the roots) of all that is manifest, and are organized upon the "cosmic tree:" the structure that holds God's aspects in place.



*"I am the one who planted this tree for all the world to delight in. With it I spanned the all, calling it all, for all depends on it, all emanates from it, all need it, all gaze upon it and await it. From here souls fly forth in joy."*<sup>3</sup>

Within the *Roots Scroll* is a hidden landscape—the unseen structure of the natural world. Just as the Universe was constructed upon concepts in the kabalistic tradition, also echoed in the Christian beliefs<sup>4</sup>, tree roots represent the concept of a sphere that binds us to our past. This transforms the object into a collective place. Words such as "religious," "cultural," "ancestral," and "spiritual sect," followed by the word "root(s)" evoke a strong connotation of a past to which we are historically connected. For my generation, however, this concept has always been precariously perched.

Having grown up watching *Sesame Street* on television instilled in us a poly-cultural sense of respect for all peoples, histories, and lifestyles. We were taught to see ourselves as fully autonomous beings bound to a democratic philosophy which leveled all notions of religion and belonging to an equal playing field. Our culture and its varied religions were considered secondary to our status as citizens. Our religion was to be celebrated with certain holiday rituals that we left buried away, hidden from day to day view. For a television culture like mine this plan seemed to work well.

Our cultural icons were brought to us in the language of television. They gave us, figures such as Cookie Monster and Big Bird, along with the generational motto *The Most Important Person in the World is You*. While this philosophy seems noble and virtuous, it clashed with the realities of the American cultural landscape of the time: war in Vietnam and economic inflation. The nostalgic "revival" of the 1950s grew from the sense that the past was a better place, where values such as family and organized religion were more deeply ingrained in the individual's psyche. In 1970 Gary Marshall created the television show *Happy Days*, in response to this situation. It filled the individual's need for a collective identity—in effect it replaced culture with history, and history presented in 30-minute segments was easily consumed. Thus, "Retro" culture was born and the past was given to us as a virtual place of refuge.

Although retro culture was perhaps a new phenomenon in popular media, this concept was already well established in the arts. Idealized landscapes of the Baroque period used history and mythology as subject matter and portrayed them in Arcadian<sup>5</sup> surroundings. Scenes were staged in dreamlike and poetic states. Characters were presented with primitive traits and childlike attitudes, self-engrossed looks and contented poses. They lounged around in an eternal springtime of free love. The similarities between Arcadia and the Christian Eden are striking in their mutual promises of sustained pleasure and





freedom from earthly peril. The key difference lies in that Eden was a place to be someday regained and arcadia was a place that was forever lost. In either case, the present held promise for darkness, with the Eden/Arcadia ideal for escape.

In the visual arts, idealized landscapes “stage” a scene whose background and lighting suggest an attitude of deep nostalgia; a longing for freedom from suffering. Claude Lorrain’s compositions are almost formulaic in their use of dark foliage or rocks on the sides of the image, leading the eye to the clear light and airy distance. The view being presented is cleaner and tamer than nature itself. Human figures in the composition range from small to miniscule so as to elevate the significance of the setting from atmosphere to subject.

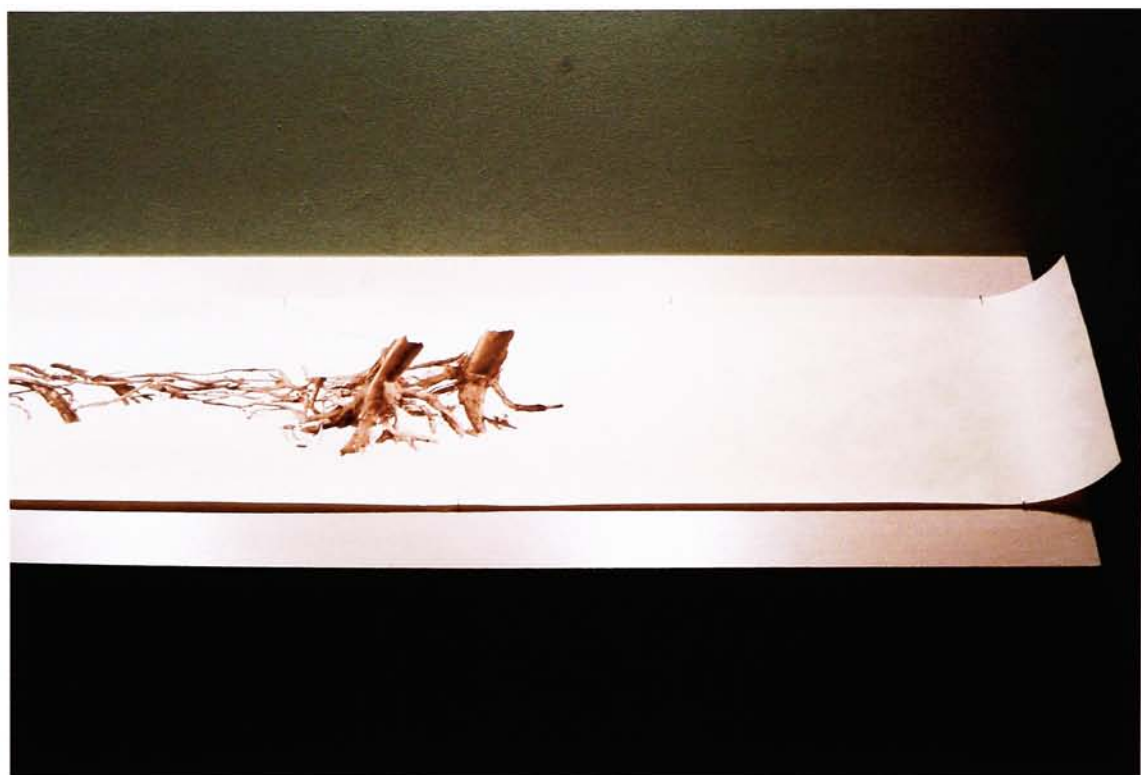
Among the present-day examples of this utopian aesthetic model, Trance music has a similar motive. It too elevates the melody of the music to the status of message and almost eliminates the lyrics. Taking its cues from the Beatles’ return from India in the late 1960s, Trance music uses eastern and primitive rhythms as its inspiration as was also the impetus for hippie fashion. The members of Trance music culture adorn themselves in child-like clothes, sometimes wearing pacifiers and carrying stuffed animals. Its forum, the Rave, is based on the Happening motif, where large congregations celebrate over full moon weekends in natural settings for outdoor dancing and indulgence in drugs. The themes of Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect (PLUR)<sup>6</sup> are key concepts to Trancers; echoing psychedelic culture while adding contemporary political correctness.

Most striking to me about the current retro movement is how it is wholly lifted from another era’s counterculture. The mainstreaming of retro culture in today’s commercial market (show pic of pt cruiser) seems to represent a strong desire to return to a simpler way of life. Today’s sense of cultural vagueness is being fed and fattened by a general apathy and a sense that the future will not be such “Happy Days.”

In any case, the Roots Scroll is both homage to our quest for insight and admonition of our blindness. I wanted to present the roots as a manuscript document on parchment paper to mark the resemblance in form to the structure of ancient and untranslatable texts. Creating an example of “authentica” (something made to look fake by symbolizing the real thing) which also drew from the Zen and Taoist books I had read.

The jaded cynicism that kept me from accepting the religious aspects of these teachings was enlightening. As I had expressed, Zen teachings were philosophical frameworks from which I tried to practice the art of photography. Zen showed me a different way of making sense of what can seem like an illogical pursuit. It was a set of beliefs, which provided a compassionate understanding of art making, whose purpose was to turn unconscious process into tangible spirit. In short, Zen philosophy supported





the channeling of ideas and craft into a product devoid of extraneous information; e.g., stripping the essential roots from their background.

A goal of Zen is to find any *essence*. In my case it is the essence of form and idea along with a framework to cope with the panic and loss of daily life. I see now that although the tenets of Zen are helpful and sometimes profound, the search for essence is a hindrance to finding it. The quest for an ideal is actually anti-Zen, yet this same pilgrimage is considered a virtue by our nostalgic culture—its goal being the return to a better past. I feel that this quest, while charming, is nihilistic and wholly unproductive. The roots scroll is meant to speak to all of us in a language we invented ourselves. Shuryu Suzuki said:

*“If an artist becomes too idealistic, he will commit suicide, because the gap between his ideal and his actual ability there is a great gap. Because there is no bridge long enough to go across the gap, he will begin to despair. That is the usual spiritual way. But our spiritual way is not so idealistic.”<sup>7</sup>*

If we collectively long for a return to our roots, here they are.



*"The Interconnected Branches Interior Mural"*

*90 x 126 inches*

*Inkjet on wallpaper*

## The Interconnected Branches Interior Mural

While the *Roots Scroll* was meant to serve as a symbol for one's nostalgic search for an ideal, the conditions spawning this phenomenon are represented in the *Interconnected Branches* of the interior mural. Printed on wallpaper and pasted to the wall, this 8 x 10 foot image plays with the viewer's relation to his surroundings. It has become a popular idea in the culture of postmodernism (thanks in part to the philosophy of Karl Marx) that our contemporary economic situation has played a large role in the individual's conception of the self within his environment. For example, the advent of the railroad and the automobile engine created a world much smaller and far more accessible than it had been a century before. The contemporary landscape is defined largely by the speed in which we pass through it. In today's technology with its high-speed Internet connections and variations on telephony, we are able to transcend spatial barriers as well as time delay. This technology has brought to our economy wider coverage and less dependence upon physical presence. We are more concerned with the changes occurring in markets outside our own immediacy. The phenomenon of globalization, following the abandonment of the gold standard, instigated the de-materialization of physical distance. This phenomenon can be seen in today's floating exchange rates where all currencies are now interconnected. Like it or not, industrialized nations are in this together.

While the idea of the Global Village is a cliché in its emphasis on community, the conditions that created it greatly affect the individual. Our disconnection from place engineers an environment lacking both the physicality and grounding of place. Just as the lack of gravity causes osteoporosis in astronauts, Globalism creates a universalized society that has little regard for the previous generations' centers of culture. This lack of a central urban landscape results in urban sprawl. Traffic, the lack of sidewalks, and gated communities are all the products of the global landscape whose physical connections create a lack of social connection.

The branches of the *Mural* lull the viewer into a false sense of comfort. I was very happy to hear people tell me that it took them up to 30 minutes of being around the image to realize that something was "wrong" with it. They had thought this was simply a pretty picture of tree branches against the sky, and that its great accomplishment lay in the scale and rendition of color, coupled with the nebulous idea of being "well composed."

What appeared to be a worm's eye view of the flowering trees of spring was, in fact, a combination of images (40 to 50) seamlessly collaged together. Branches were connected in illogical ways, and spaces were reconstructed to jar the viewer's sense of rational perspective. It was easy to induce this response; I used myself as an example of





someone who has very limited experiences with the organic world, and tried to give myself just enough information to relate to my own idea (or memory) of how a scene like this should appear. Once the original suggestion was visually in place, I was free to alter as much of the image as I wanted. When the trick began to reveal itself, I would either back off from or strengthen the parts of the image that gave the suggestion of normalcy.

With this image in particular, I am challenging the viewer on two widely held truths: first, our belief that photographs are truthful documents of the real world, and secondly, a stronger and even primordial belief that the natural is authentic. Addressing the former: a photograph is supposedly a two-dimensional depiction in light, form and color of a scene from one viewpoint. It is what we have been conditioned to see; it forms our way of organizing thoughts into a cohesive and rational reality. With regard to the authenticity of nature, our society's current interests in organic food and natural products, "eastern" medicine, yoga, and reality television indicate that we need to have the belief, if only in appearance, that there are some areas which shouldn't fall to human intervention. There is an almost religious mentality that nature is recognizably distinct from man-made reality, and that it is more valuable, as evidenced by the examples of organic apples and free-range poultry. Cézanne said almost 100 years ago that when we see the land, all we see are pictures. Personally, I have seen far more pictures of land than I have seen the land itself.

Each of us has a desire to believe that what is pictured is real; a verification of our place within the world. I wanted to make an image that acted as a metaphor for our cultural "placelessness" and lack of grounding. In the images from the previous year's work I began to strip away the background from the image and slightly alter the form of the organic object to provide a feeling of being removed and hidden from the environment.

*The Branches*, more than any other of these pictures, used the technology of Adobe Photoshop to form the message of the image itself. Photoshop provides an easy way of seamlessly montaging images together. To connect the roots I used the same technique, however as the object was removed from the larger scene the spatial effects created by this type of montageing were largely hidden. This method is common to Photoshop, and my interest lies in combining many separate points of view into one image.

Perspective has taken several forms in its codification since its revolutionary one-point linear perspective of the Renaissance. From the continuation of that codification in photography to Cubism's rejection of its conventions, this new technology enables us to arrange several "modern" perspectives into one scene without immediate detection.





Linear perspective makes certain assumptions: namely that images are displayed flat on a common plane, that the artist saw the scene from a fixed point of view with a singular and objective eye, and that there is a pre-determined point of view in which to look at the image. As Panofsky said:

*In a sense, perspective transforms psychological space into mathematical space. It negates the differences between front and back, between right and left, between bodies and intervening space ("empty" space), so that the sum of all the parts of space and all its contents are absorbed into a single "quantum continuum."<sup>8</sup>*

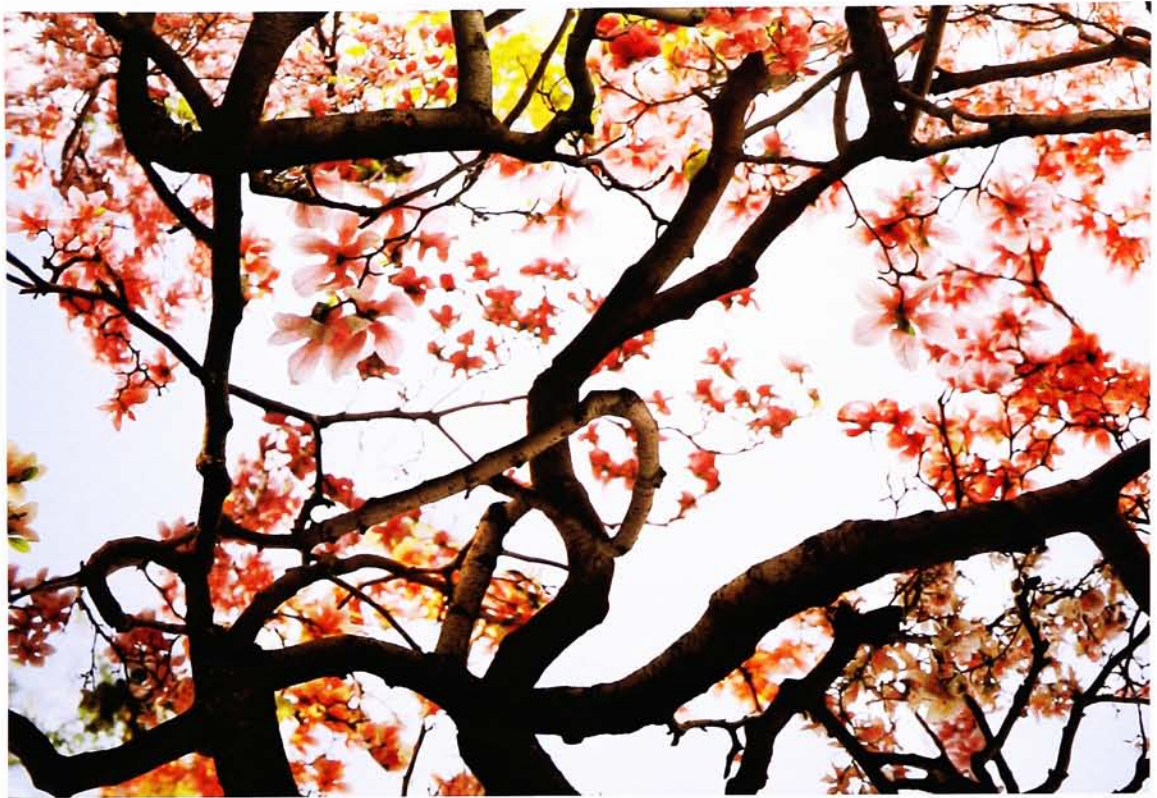
While this type of perspective makes that of the viewer the determining factor of reality, the new technology can also play with this idea. As the idea of cultural placelessness affects the individual's sense of determining reality, I found that in the *Interconnected Branches* I was illustrating this point by generating a scene in which there are many points of view.

There is no one visual point of reference in which to see the picture. The picture has illogical foreshortening and an absurd sense that the rules of the natural world have somehow been broken. The large-scale of the branches fills the viewer's field of vision, as would the natural scene, yet the viewer cannot find an anchor or reference. Seeing several vanishing points concurrently and having multiple picture planes inspires a sense of vertigo that the viewer must reconcile in his own imagination. Because of the wealth of similar images the viewer sees, this process of reconciliation is immediate; the narrative of the branches is revealing of the trick that his mind has played upon itself. It was a slight-of-hand gag that turned the subject of the picture from being about the reality of nature to being about the nature of reality.

My visual inspiration for this type of picture lies in the landscape screen paintings from the Edo period in Japan. Screens are similar to wallpaper murals in their shared historical purpose of interior decoration, and as such are totems indicative of the prevailing social structure. As the Tokugawa Shogunate gained political control over Japan in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the socio-cultural hierarchy went through drastic changes. A society of feudal imperialists perpetually at war became more unified and peaceful; and Japan's economy prospered.

As the weight of war removed the stronghold on the urban merchant class (along with the rapid growth of the urban center; i.e., Edo-Tokyo), there emerged a new set of luxury goods, popular art, design, and entertainment. A decadent culture arose in strong contrast to the pious feudal society that preceded it. Fashion, entertainment, brothels, and other





pleasures were the new motifs explored by artists in their depictions of society. The concept of Ukiyo-E (floating worlds) was introduced to describe the feelings of these pleasures. While there is a strong correlation to Kabuki (puppet theater) in the floating style of Ukiyo-E, the land itself also floated. Hills, trees, and water were represented as separate and autonomous elements disconnected from their surroundings, befitting the carefree and pleasure-seeking philosophy of the time (albeit commissioned by the new government).

The similarities are striking between Edo period Japan and our youth culture of today. The popularity of cocaine in the 1980s gave way to that of Ecstasy (MDMA) in the 1990s, and with it came a culture that wanted to be entranced and lost in music and celebration. In his *Tales of the Floating World*, Asai Ryoi says of his time

*“...Living only for the moment, turning our full attention to the pleasures of the moon, the snow, the cherry blossoms and the maple trees, singing songs, drinking wine, and diverting ourselves just in floating, floating, caring not a whit for pauperism staring us in the face, refusing to be disheartened, like a gourd floating along with the river current: this is what we call the floating world.”<sup>9</sup>*

Cyberspace today represents the fleeting attitude that many of my generation possess. It would seem that in both the globalism of today and the isolationism in Edo period Japan the attitude of apathy is predominant. While for Edo period Japan the purpose of the landscape screens was to give an impressionistic description of “here I am,” the branches ask the question “where am I?”



***"The Mountain Range Backdrop"  
or  
"The Gravel Piles"***

***28.5 x 140 inches (paneled)***

***Inkjet on cotton fabric***

***2003***



## The Mountain Range Backdrop

I used to love western television shows such as *Rawhide*, *Kung Fu*, and *The Lone Ranger*, along with the films of John Wayne. I felt that I shared their solitary spirit. I had that same understanding of being alone, of being “out there” as they were. Maybe it was the influence of Disco, whose theme was dancing alone, or maybe I was just a melancholy kid who spent too much time watching television. In either case, I could relate. Looking back now, with the eyes of someone educated in western landscape painting, I see that *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *Lost in Space* were examining similar ideas about the frontier albeit updated for contemporary times. Moreover, I felt that the attitude a photographer had to take was that of a lone gunman, moving about a hard road or grassy knoll, on a quest for... something. I never knew what these cowboys were looking for, but I was told that it was the quest alone that mattered. Many years later, reading Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* confirmed the validity of this idea. Years after that, while hiking in the Sinai desert, with Bedouin and camels replacing Indians and horses I finally got a taste of the wild and rugged landscape which the Lone Ranger and Tonto had inhabited. My vision of that scene was influenced by what I had watched 20 years earlier on television.

The final incarnation of the *Mountain Range Backdrop* was a tribute to my television-inspired view of the land. It began simply through photographing those ubiquitous piles of gravel that seem to litter the Rochester area. What I saw on the contact sheets was compelling from the beginning; the gravel had been transformed into hills, dunes, mini mountains, and rolling fields. By adding color, I could turn these scenes into any place imaginable. I learned then that color equals theme; and since theme in this case was tied to setting, I could change the setting by changing the colors of the gravel. I thought of the cowboy, who carried the myth of the wild, untamed land as a backdrop for his own wild, untamed nature. As such, I became the picture-making cowboy. Clint Eastwood’s archetypal quest in his various portrayals of the cowboy was to make the land and not be subjected to it. I figured that if there was no cowboy, than no camera would be photographing him against the western backdrop.

There is a reciprocal relationship between wildness and discovery. Examples for this idea are abundant: the children of Israel wandered in the Sinai before coming to their promised land, Jesus and other mystics went to the wilderness to before resolving problems, the American Indians took hallucinogens in religious ceremonies in order to communicate with divine beings, and artists continue timelessly to grapple with “the wild side” before formalizing their ideas on canvas or on paper. While it was the western





wilderness of mountains, Indians, deserts, valleys and gorges that shaped the American consciousness, it was through the taming of the frontier that the real American identity was founded. The topography of the west, despite being a place of peril and fear, was also one that offered many natural resources of great benefit to burgeoning American industries.

To provide the reader with a brief backdrop of the literature that influenced me, it was not until later that nature itself became a source of pride to Americans. The footprint of European civilization upon the “New World” transformed this wilderness into an environment of possibility; a virtual Garden of Eden. While the magnitude of the landscape served as a metaphor for the grand plans to the continent, it also served as a metaphor for escape from the confinement of European oppression left behind by the immigrants. In John O’Sullivan’s article on Manifest Destiny he points to the land as a place where a new society can be built:

*“The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can. We point to the everlasting truth on the first page of our national declaration, and we proclaim to the millions of other lands, that ‘the gates of hell’—the powers of aristocracy and monarchy—shall not prevail against it.”<sup>10</sup>*

Transforming the wilderness into a cultivated landscape meant embracing the Wild as a concept. This concept was illustrated by painters such as Cole, Bierstadt, Church, and Moran; and was funded by the United States Government. Thomas Moran, who had worked as Chief Illustrator for Scribner’s monthly, had enough political pull to gain access to most parts of the West at which time was being lobbied by congress as national park recreational land for tourism purposes. Funded by Jay Cooke, the President of the Northern Pacific Railroad, Moran set out on the geological survey expedition of Ferdinand Hayden in 1871. While the trip was essentially a public relations campaign to foster more curiosity in natural wonders such as the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone for the benefit of the railroad, Moran in his work underscored this sense of wonder. His painting of the Grand Canyon, bought by the United States Government for \$10,000, was only loosely based on the factual reproduction of the scene:





*"I place no value upon literal transcriptions from nature.  
My general scope is not realistic; all my tendencies are  
toward idealization..."*<sup>11</sup>

In Moran's painting, along with that of many others, the myth of our national character as Americans is built. On review we can see how these ideas were crafted: the idea of the mountain is symbolic for the heights conceivable by the human mind in its quest for safety, security and entertainment.

The depiction of nature in a landscape is connected to the idea of ownership; whether that notion lies in physical and political boundaries, like those of the American Frontier, or the possession of the land as setting for human drama. We use the land and its organic elements symbolically to enrich our stories and create our myths. There is also, however, a biological aspect to landscape representation, which supposes an evolutionary preference for land to be "owned" in some sense.

There have been scientific theories stating that our visual preferences for certain types of landscape derive from our evolutionary needs. Savanna theory (Habitat theory) proposes an obvious conclusion that our choice of environment is dependant upon our ability within it to forage for food and seek shelter from the elements. Scientific studies conducted in children (whose preferences would supposedly reflect instinct over intellect) on the types of landscapes they preferred showed an inclination towards landscapes similar to those of the African Savanna (in which it is thought that much of early human evolution took place).

The aesthetic elements of the African Savanna include water, trees with branches beginning two meters off the ground, a variety of wooded and clear areas (places to hide and/or escape), and paths which come in and out of view — providing areas of exploration.<sup>12</sup> While this attitude can be seen in post-Renaissance landscape design of parks and gardens, it also holds true for depictions of fine-art landscape. The Russian artists Komar and Melamid conducted opinion polls to determine styles of painting most- and least-preferred by Western countries, and the findings were striking. The vast majority of countries preferred landscape paintings whose attributes mimic those of the Savanna theory polls: the representation of available food (animals and plants), water, shelter, and clarity of vision.

More striking was the preference for the depictive style of landscapes of the Hudson River School. In these landscapes there is a large landmass in the distant left, a body of water in the middle, trees on the right, and a clearing in the front. Perspective was placed high off the ground and with predominantly blue skies.<sup>13</sup> Given this research and the mythology surrounding different types of landscape depictions, along with the influence





of the televised landscape, it is no surprise that the illusory landscape prevails in the *Mountain Range* picture. It states very clearly that landscapes are man-made phenomena and never truly “natural.” This picture is for me the most successful of the series in this regard; the image was created by photographing landscaping materials to build a mountain more convincing than a photograph of a real mountain. The landscaping material became the image building material.

I feel that my images conjure up negative ideas about man’s relation to the organic; an underlying theme of destruction and the manipulation of a realm long deemed untouchable contrasts with the beauty and precious quality of the subject. The Wildlands Project, Earth First, and Greenpeace are all noble causes for environmental protection, espousing the idea that without a natural wilderness our cultural sense of connectedness is lost. Their sometimes radical attempts at “saving” nature can be seen in the same heroic light as those pioneers whose drive it was to “tame” it.

The Gaia theory of James Lovelock purports that the world is a living organism, and that as human beings we are a part of that system. Yet more than any other life form on Earth, we have been able to change and manipulate the environment. It seems that the natural process of adaptation and evolution are laws reserved for the other, “lower” life forms. Seemingly, man has defined himself in opposition to nature as a defense against the psychic crush of his inevitably short life. For example, societies throughout history that respected the environment fell to those that did not. Those societies by comparison were technologically less advanced, their populations poor, and their attitudes we today have ranked as “natural;” which translates into more animal, than human. It was a way for justifying not only the genocide of the American Indians, but also our antipathy for the events in the underdeveloped portions of the world. It is a product of our fear of nature that we embark upon a path to re-create the world for our consumption. It is racism, and “anti-nature.”

In reality, we are most powerless against the laws of nature. Regarding our crops, our picnics or our wars—natural laws make the final and dispassionate decisions for us. For pre-modern (pre-Renaissance) man, nature had an entirely different connotation. Ideas such as picnics and walks in the forest were anathema to his way of thinking; he was bound to nature in the same way we are bound to our workplaces. Kenneth Clark, when discussing medieval man states:

*“The average layman would not have thought it wrong to enjoy nature; he would simply have said that nature was not enjoyable. The fields meant nothing but hard work... the seacoast meant danger of storm and piracy. And*



*beyond these more or less profitable parts of the earth's surface stretched an interminable area of forest and swamp."*<sup>14</sup>

The factor that liberates us from our fear of nature is our new frontier, technology. Whether in the production of crops, the domestication of animals, or the harnessing of natural forces and resources, technology has given us a sense of power while facing these fears. It has so far, despite a few unfortunate accidents, helped us live longer, healthier lives. Our technological innovations have allowed us to inhabit every corner of the earth and exploit its resources, providing for us a background in which we can have an experience of nature while remaining comforted by our ability to leave it.

Landscape has become an "e-escape." This idea of the organic has rapidly evolved along with our own technological evolution. As the mall has replaced the town market, our relation to the visible and tangible has been altered as well. The Mall has made our physical limitations of access less problematic, by giving us a desire for increased accessibility. In this turn has provided for us a framework in which to view nature—one which is optimized, sanitized and ready for consumption.



***"Circular Rainbow Inspirational Poster"***

***18.5x24 inches***

***Offset lithography Poster***

***2003***

## The Circular Rainbow Inspirational Poster

It is fair to say that from their onset, depictions of nature have always been symbolic. There is a drive to transform nature, whether in bioengineering or in art. The earliest of landscape motifs in medieval art employed the organic as representations of ideas. It was thought of as a carryover from Hellenistic times that cognitive ability was far superior to sensory stimulation. In the Judeo-Christian tradition the rainbow was the first symbol; a sign from God to Noah after the flood that he would not destroy the earth and its inhabitants again; it was the covenant he made with the earth. To many other cultures the rainbow came to symbolize the ultimate harmony of the earth in contradistinction to a great natural disaster or as a bridge from the lower to the upper worlds. The Buddhists view the rainbow as the highest state of samsara before the clear light of Nirvana as well as relating the seven colors of the arc to the seven planets.

Ultimately, the rainbow is a “bridge” between the natural and the supernatural, the earthly world and the higher world, the world of symbolizing our environment and the world of representation. But what happens when the optical puzzle, the mystery behind the phenomenon has been discovered? Just as questions of free will are re-examined in the face of DNA sequencing, the rainbow serves as an Atlantis: Its nostalgic component funnels it into the realm of kitsch. It has become a failed symbol in the face of ozone depletion and global warming, carbon monoxide pollution, overcrowding and a host of new diseases.

I made the *Circular Rainbow* to symbolize the failure of the mythic symbol, while on the other hand it represents the new frontier. If there is a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, a circular rainbow represents our continued search. Technology has changed our conception of reality in the way it provides for us the experience of living without needing actual life. Tangible nature is no longer needed in the era of computer simulation. Contemporary biological research is done predominantly with the aid of gene sequencing and chemical analysis. The computer has aided our understanding of the real as well as made it obsolete. The virtual environment is our next frontier, and perhaps it will be the only place in which we can live—our own creation becoming too unnatural to sustain humanity.

Making the Rainbow image proved far more difficult than I could have imagined. It proved that making something appear simple is extremely complex, involving lots of complicated struggling and manipulating. Making something appear complex requires the opposite: a simple flow of one's abilities will always reveal the intricate and idiosyncratic





fluctuations of one's hand. The picture was meant to appear effortless with the simplicity of a snapshot—something just seen and recorded.

Circular rainbows do happen naturally; they are visible from airplanes. A classmate of mine who had witnessed this on a flight told me about it, and I instantly thought that this representation would fit with my current theme of sentimental and fabricated imagery of nature. A couple of weeks later, I saw and photographed a rainbow in the sky and knew that I had my source material. To make the picture convincing, the shape couldn't be perfectly round nor the light uniform. I had to shape the brightness and the saturation of the rainbow within the sky, which also had its own undulations of color, density, and depth. An apparently clear sky contains infinite colors and values and a rainbow is part of that scheme. I can honestly say that I gained great humility through making this picture, recalling some of my Taoist readings about the interconnectedness of events—that both the rainbow and the blue of the sky are never isolated in form, but part of a totality of experience, linking the object with the background.

There was a very fine line between making the illusion appear convincingly “natural,” and having it look digitally generated. There had to be imperfections in the circularity as well as a fluctuation in the coloring to create something that appeared real. This challenge illustrated what Lao Tzu had written millennia ago about “true straightness being crooked.” It seemed to me that to sustain the feeling of correctness in the appearance of the image, I needed to present the viewer with something incorrect.

There is an unconscious leap of faith that we make when looking at the world: it is our way of rationalizing its inconsistencies, and it gives us the illusion of normalcy. A slightly imperfect circle presents a catalyst for the viewer to imagine a perfect one. In a sense, that is what the rainbow symbolizes: we use an illusion to create an illusion. With contemporary technologies, however, the division between truth and illusion has become highly blurred. This is the cybernetic notion of a circular causality, created to provide machines with more efficient data with which to act. Computers are machines with the ability to “self monitor” so as to become more efficient, and in a sense act (according to the Gaia theory) as a self-sustained organism. Resolving data systems with the natural system is a step towards becoming less dependant upon direct human perception. In incorporating computer technology, we have placed ourselves into a symbiotic relationship with the virtual: we control it and it controls us. Perhaps the Y2K fiasco was our first concrete example of this phenomenon.

The “space” created by the Internet has provided us with the ability to communicate and have experiences without the limitations of moving our physical forms. If our focus in the advancement of civilization has depended upon knowledge, than the virtual





platform picks up the pace with the speed and accessibility it has provided. Without the confines of the body, the mind is free to observe and have a different type of interface with other minds; more information is passed more freely. Combining this with technology that can act independently, a new frontier, or wilderness, is limited only to the confines of our imagination.



*"Oil on Canvas (engine oil on pavement)"*

*9 x 14.5 inches*

*Inkjet (iris print) on canvas*

*2003*

## Oil on Canvas

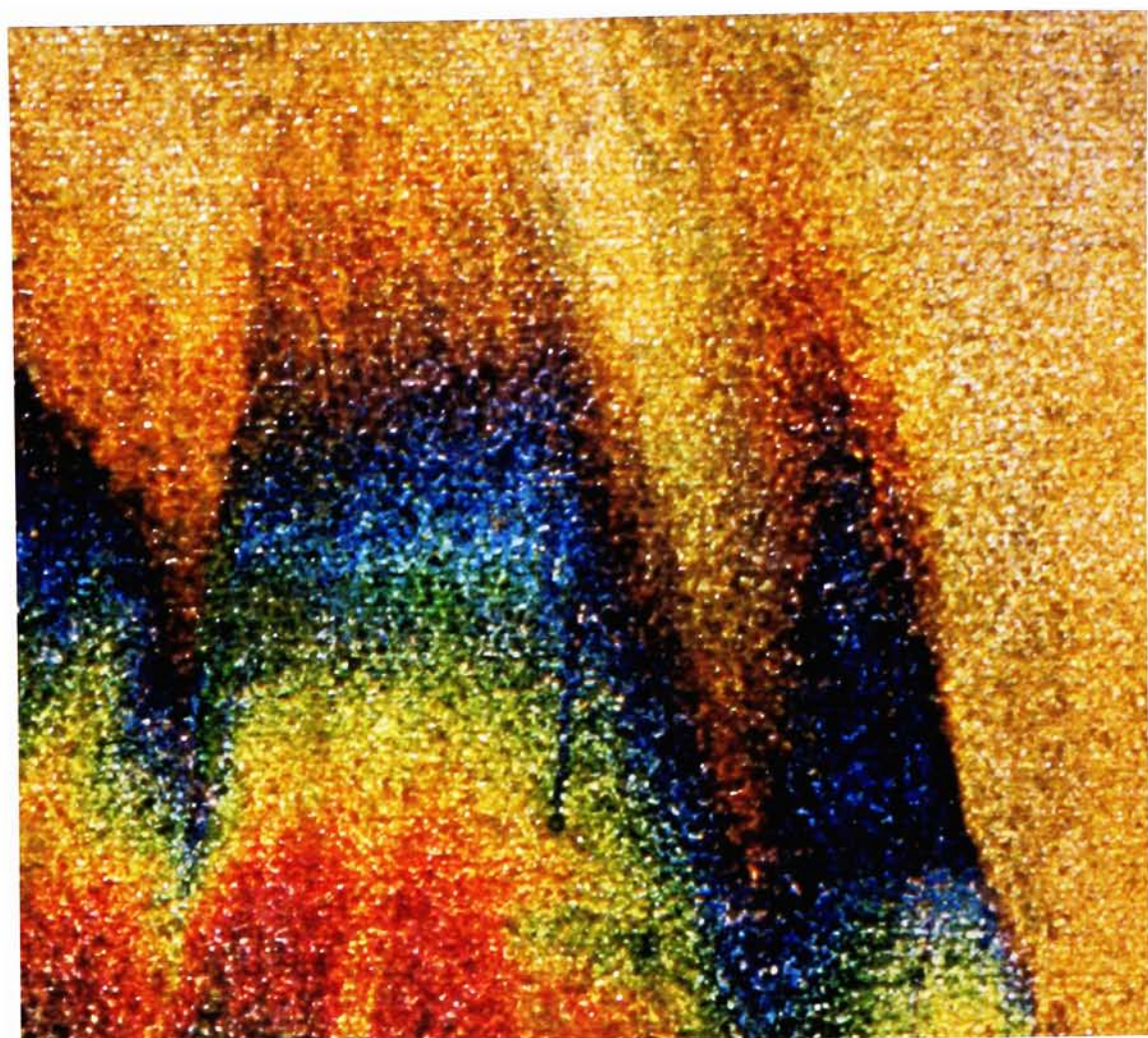
*Oil on Canvas* is perhaps the most difficult image to talk about; it was the most complicated image that I made, and embodies for me the sum of the dystopic aspects of our natural world. It was made in response to the rainbow image and was made in reference to my readings on the concept of the Sublime.

I felt a need in my thesis work to provide a larger picture of the elements, which for me represent the natural in our times. I felt that having a display of pretty pictures only gave part of the story. I needed to make an image that was in direct opposition to all other pieces I had made previously. I also wanted to give myself the opportunity to play with an edge with which I felt uncomfortable. The purpose of the other images was to relate information through pleasure, to lull the viewer into belief or disbelief, and to provide for him a platform where he could feel at ease in viewing how I saw the world. *Oil on Canvas* attempted to remove this platform and present its ideas in naked form.

Like the rainbow, *Oil on Canvas* is an illusion: the colors we see are simple refractions of light on the surface of an oil slick that I found in a parking lot. The color could only be seen in certain parts of the oil at any one given time, and to gain a picture of the entire object one had to be moving over it. I was drawn to the shimmering surface. I thought about how the object was at the same time both natural and man-made, and wanted to represent this semi-miraculous, semi-banal object in one picture. I created it by photographing only the parts of the oil that reflected the light most intensely and later, with Photoshop, seaming those parts together. I was struck at how what I was making looked like paint—oil paint—but the real color was made up of light. It seemed to embody painting and photography, the moving image and the still, the natural and the man-made. It was at once both beautiful and terrifying.

The image is amorphous—the opposing forces that hold together our ideas of formal beauty. Reading about the Sublime, I was struck by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century painter J.M.W. Turner and his presentation of experience; his sense of danger and excitement conveyed to the viewer via his paintings. Turner displayed the incomprehensible as a representation of pure energy. I was inspired by the way in which the depth of his skies appeared to proceed from infinity towards the picture plane, to eventually overpower the viewer. The Sublime was that which, as opposed to beauty, called into question our notion of comfort and security in the visible world. Imagery that connotes, or conjures up, the helplessness that man feels in the face of great natural events (storms, darkness) calls into question the essence of our freedom and autonomy. But the sublime was also a romantic concept. It came about as the celebration of the individual with its pull away from a rationalist





mindset. It showed us that we were on the edge of larger discoveries, that the fear involved needed to be, if not understood, deserving of attempted expression.

The Sublime in art of the romantic period was an event that took place through either Nature's power or events of historic myth. It was happening outside of man's control and placed in the hands of the Creator. It referenced our age of discovery and invention, and it was thought that true understanding of the power of the deity was to be found in the examination of "pure" creation. Thoreau wrote in *Walden* in 1854:

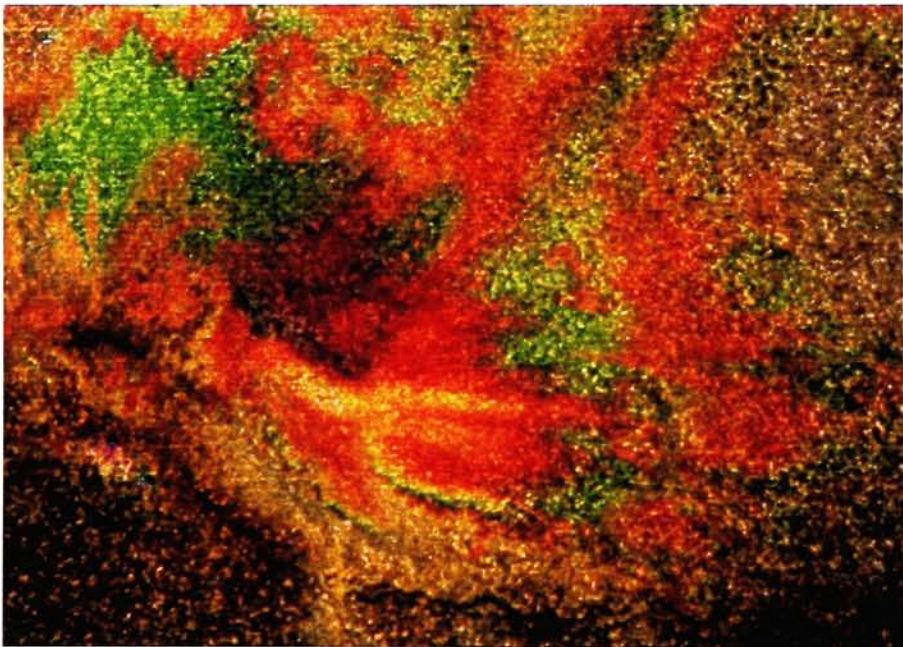
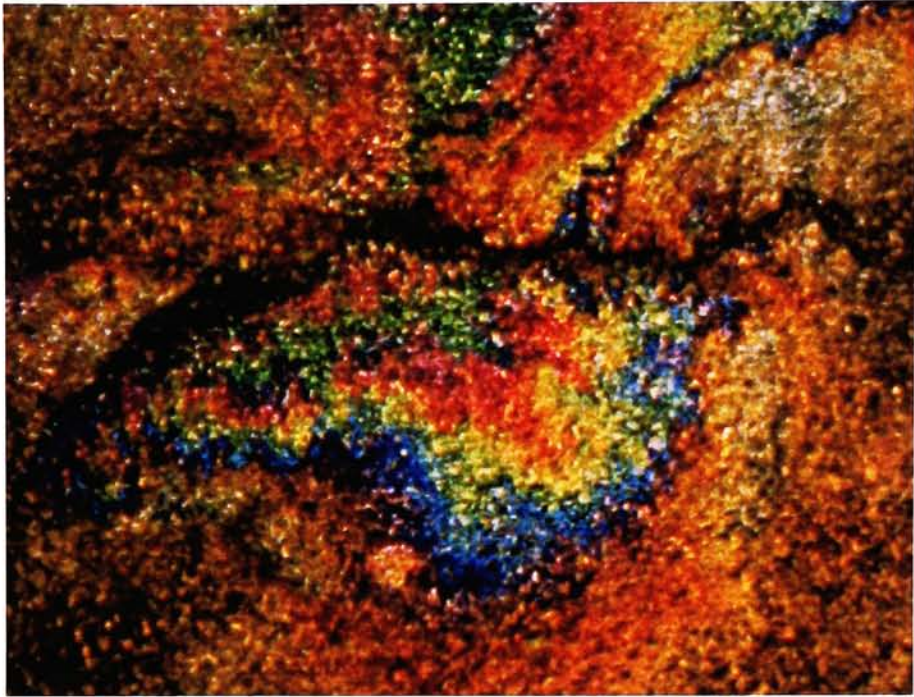
*"God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us."*<sup>15</sup>

During World War II, American artists of the Abstract Expressionist period also became interested in the sublime, yet for them the reference was entirely different. For them the sublime connoted not an external, natural fear, but an unknown of geography and religious power—but a fear of the internal, the unseeable, and the seeds of man's power over himself and others. As Freud's theory of the Unconscious had purported that there are areas of the mind that are at work without our cognitive knowledge, and Einstein's theories had told us that mass and energy were interchangeable, the paradigms of our sense of self and place had radically shifted. The paradigm of reality had shifted from what Thoreau had mentioned, and the sublime in late Modernism expressed the position of the viewer's mind beyond that of his senses.

But how is it really possible to deal with the sublime today without falling into the ridiculous? If the sublime assumes a soul from which the individual can experience "the event," is it possible to reconcile these "experiences" in light of an existence where the body and the soul have fallen out of contact? Social conditions have created an individual whose experiences are largely *virtual* and the reality that surrounds us is largely man made. There are of course new frontiers, new events and concerns which reach the level of being worthy of representation in the Sublime in the romantic sense—but that is for the romantics to work out. I had known all along that the prospect of creating the Sublime was futile; that all I could do is re-create and use its motifs.

In short, I had made a souvenir, a representation of the "good old days" when nature was painted, and painting was natural—an image to honor the lost era of creation with the materials (oil) that initiated this loss. Perhaps the abyss of the Sublime today is our







fascination with being de-mystified, with the supposition of the unknown and the taming of our fears.



## The Exhibition

Brian Emery and I decided to combine our work to create a two-man show. About eight months before the exhibition we had decided to combine our work together to create something other than a display of pictures—we wanted to present our ideas as a total experience and make a show that jointly explored a single idea. As both our styles of work dealt with the manipulated environment, we felt that the show needed to become an environment in itself that would mimic our collective idea.

Our original designs for the show were quite grandiose; its production would have been highly expensive and complicated. For example, the first title for the show was “A walk though the city and into the garden.” It was intended to mimic a museum exhibit where Brian’s street scene panoramas would be printed larger than life and displayed in cramped passageways through which the viewer would walk. The canvas would physically encompass the viewer; thus mimicking the feel of strolling down the city block. My work was to be presented in an open space where the viewer would stand or sit at a distance in a relaxed environment, and could simply enjoy the scenery. We drew up some schematics for the show, designing the gallery space and choreographing the viewers’ movements so as to continue with the theme of subtle manipulation. When our exhibition concept became more realistic, we understood that the city/garden idea was a much larger concept than that we were dealing with. Taking all this down a notch we began to understand that Brian was looking at the Street and I was looking at the Park.

Most of my ideas begin this way. They start with a much larger concept of what is really there which frees my mind to dream of all of its possibilities. Only later do the ideas get cleaned up and filed down, presenting the real idea in a more honest and direct format. Just as my pictures (like the process of photography itself) are subtractive, my method is to begin with the large and rough, and work my way down to the fine.

Brian and I would spend time brainstorming on how the concept of our work needed to manifest itself physically, but once the final idea was decided upon we would spend long hours together, working late into the night on the physical pieces. Much of our time was spent at Home Depot, making decisions on the types of screws, light fixtures, paint colors and such needed to mount the exhibition. We worked together, looking over each other’s images for corrections, and overseeing each other’s progress. I have never worked this way before; I had always worked alone, and I can say that being in such an environment although stressful was also extremely helpful. By having another person around me who cared as much as I did about my work was of great benefit in separating the image I had in my mind from the physical product of ink on paper. As there were





areas that one of us was more skilled in than the other, we were able to help one another realize his ideas more quickly. Mostly, the benefit of this collaboration was having a partner with both an impassioned and objective eye.

## Conclusion

I would like to quote from the exhibition statement, which Brian and I had jointly written.

*“Down the Street and into the Park is a show about the urban condition. It investigates the relationships between man’s place in the public realm and cultural views of the land. In this place, theatrical street tableaux are juxtaposed with virtual views of natural elements and landscapes. Together it becomes a model of how we relate to our surroundings. The combined result of these two bodies of work simulates the conditions for introspection. The viewer is confronted with technology’s effect on the environment, how one sees their surroundings, and how we act within it.”*



## ENDNOTES

- 1) p. 11 Cleary, Thomas (translator) The Spirit of Tao: Shambala Publications, Inc., Boston and London 1991
- 2) p. 25 Philpot, J.H., The Sacred Tree: Macmillian & Co., London 1897
- 3) p.77 Matt, Daniel C., The Essential Kabbalah New York: Quality Paperback Club, New York 1995
- 4) “in the beginning was the word...”
- 5) a mythic place of goodness, harmony and plenty.
- 6) p. 25 Meadan, Bryan, *Transcendental Alienation: Moral Panics, Tance Music, Culture, and Transitional Identity in Israel* (masters thesis): Hebrew University, Jerusalem 2001
- 7) p. 57 Suzuki, Shunryu, Zen Mind Beginner’s Mind: Weather Hill, New York & Tokyo 1994
- 8) p. 31 Panofsky, Erwin, Perspective as Symbolic Form: Zone Books, New York 1997
- 9) p. 10 Lane, Richard, Masters of the Japanese Print: Doubleday & Co., Garden City 1962
- 10) p. 427 O’Sullivan, John L., “The Great Nation of Futurity” *The United States Democratic Review*. Vol. 6, Issue 23, pp. 426–430
- 11) Anderson, Nancy K. Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West: Yale University Press, New Haven & London 1992
- 12) Juras, Philip, *The Pre-settlement Piedmont Savannah: A Model for Landscape Design and Management* (masters thesis): University of Georgia ,1997
- 13) [www.diacenter.org/km/painting.html](http://www.diacenter.org/km/painting.html)
- 14) p. 3-4 Clark, Kenneth Landscape Into Art: Harper & Row, New York 1984
- 15) p.141 Thoreau, Henry David, Walden and Civil Disobedience: Penguin Books, New York 1988

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[www.diacenter.org/km/painting.html](http://www.diacenter.org/km/painting.html)



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